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ABSTRACT

Certificates are a valuable new currency in the information economy. Through a postbaccalaureate or postmaster's certificate, adults acquire market-demanded competencies in a short time. Many certificate-seekers are currently employed adults looking for focused, flexible, interdisciplinary, and highly relevant education opportunities. Certificate programs may be introductions to adult students considering entering degree programs, the foundation for further training, or a follow-up to previous training. The most popular certificate programs are those related to health care and information technology. Adult learners with specific goals and multiple responsibilities are fueling demand for distance delivery. While colleges and universities have almost doubled the number of distance subbaccalaureate certificate programs, almost 50 percent of graduate certificate programs have no distance offerings. For-profit virtual institutions are rushing to fill this gap. Some certificates are tied to industry and professional standards, but there is no comprehensive quality assurance system for certificate programs similar to that for college degrees. Since relevancy of course content is a critical issue in short-term programs, institutions offering certificates should have in place a process to revise or retire programs no longer in alignment with workplace needs and a fast-track approval process. (Contains 23 annotated resources.) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERT NO. 16

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Career Certificates: High Quality *and* Cutting Edge?

Certificates are a "valuable new currency" in the information economy (National Alliance of Business 2000). Traditional credentials no longer suffice as knowledge has exploded, new fields and occupational specialties are emerging, jobs and organizations change rapidly, and working lives lengthen. A postbaccalaureate or postmaster's certificate enables adults to acquire market-demanded competencies in a short time (Driscoll 1996). Many certificate seekers are currently employed adults looking for focused, flexible, interdisciplinary, and highly relevant educational opportunities (Patterson et al. 1998; White 1997). Certificate programs "may serve as good introductions to adult students considering, but cautious about, entering degree programs" (University of Wisconsin 1996, online, n.p.). They may be the foundation for further training or a follow-up to previous training (NAB 2000). The massive market for certificates has been estimated at 40-50 million people, but it is difficult to determine how many are awarded outside mainstream institutions (Kohl and LaPidus 2000). The most popular certificate programs are those related to health care and information technology (e.g., e-commerce, Internet publishing, online teaching) (Kohl and LaPidus 2000; NAB 2000).

Adult learners with specific goals and multiple responsibilities are fueling demand for distance delivery. The number of distance subbaccalaureate certificate programs offered by colleges and universities nearly doubled from 1995-1998 (Lewis et al. 1999). However, 45.5% of 113 graduate certificate programs surveyed by Patterson (1998) had no distance offerings. For-profit virtual institutions are rushing to fill this gap (Marchese 1999). The certificates phenomenon and the rise of new types of providers raise issues about quality and currency.

Quality. Some certificates are tied to industry and professional standards. However, there is no comprehensive quality assurance system for certificate programs similar to that for college degrees (Marchese 1999). If a collection of certificates demonstrates competency, are master's degrees still relevant? On the other hand, certificate earners may have cutting-edge skills but lack a broader perspective (Kohl and LaPidus 2000). Learners should ask critical questions about program sponsors, course content, updating/refreshers, and whether the certificate is recognized and valued by employers or transferable to degree programs (Driscoll 1996).

Currency. The relevance of course content is a critical issue in short-term programs. Are learners acquiring competencies that will soon be obsolete? Institutions offering certificates should have in place a review process (Hutton 1997) or sunset clause (Patterson 1998) to revise or retire programs that no longer align with workplace needs. A fast-track approval process helps get new programs established quickly to meet changing demands (ibid.).

Certificates can help adults upgrade skills or change career paths while accommodating their personal needs and learning styles. However, learners and providers should be wary of an uncritical focus on delivery over content as well as the bottom-line orientation of employers who may fund certificates as good investments in worker skills. These concerns should not overshadow the key elements of a good certificate program: quality of the subject matter, learning outcomes, and the validity of the credential (Irby 1999).

Resources

Black, L. H. "Computing Survival Skills: Training the Workforce to Stay Abreast of Technology." ***CAUSE/EFFECT*** 21, no. 4 (1998): 49-52. (EJ 579 939)
The University of Virginia's Computing Survival Skills program addresses the ongoing technology training needs of staff with a series of workshops that result in a certificate in computer troubleshooting skills.

Brown, B. L. ***Vocational Certificates and College Degrees. ERIC Digest No. 212***. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1999. (ED 434 248) <ericacve.org/digests.asp>
Compares the economic benefits of career certificates and college degrees, their employment outcomes, and their role in the lifelong learning patterns of career-focused individuals.

Carr, S. "Enrollment Growth Remains Slow at Western Governors University." ***Chronicle of Higher Education*** 46, no. 19 (January 14, 2000): A49.
The number of students enrolled in degree and certificate programs at Western Governors University, a virtual university, is significantly lower than projected. The low enrollments may be the result of the amount of time it took to plan and implement programs.

Driscoll, M. "Professional Development: Certification Programs." ***Training Scene*** 26, no. 3 (March 1996): 5-8. (ED 397 262)
Discusses the benefits of certificate programs; lists 12 questions to ask, pertaining to programs' sponsors, content, recognition, and refresher requirements.

Gordon, G. "Fancy Certificates May Not Be All They're Cracked up to Be." ***Business Times*** (South Africa), May 31, 1998. <www.btimes.co.za/98/0531/tech/tech13.htm>
Some private sector providers of certification in computer skills may be unscrupulous operators who issue certificates without ever testing learners. The information technology industry is attempting to establish standards that will enhance the value of certificates.

Green, D. J. "Educational Institutions and Industry-Oriented Certifications." ***Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*** 41, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 63-65.
Presents a rationale for business educators considering offering industry-oriented certification courses. Focuses on the options, requirements, and the benefits for educational institutions, students, and business and industry.

Hutton, S. "Declining Enrollment Sparks Certificate Review: Lessons Learned." ***Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*** 23, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 23-41. (EJ 557 825)
Advisory committees and surveys of students and employers were used to revise the human resources and personnel management certificate programs at the University of Calgary. Revisions were done in the context of resource constraints, postsecondary competition, and declining enrollment.

Irby, A. J. "Postbaccalaureate Certificates: Higher Education's Growth Market." ***Change*** 31, no. 2 (March-April 1999): 36-43.

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Examines factors behind the growth in certificate programs and the differences between university and nonuniversity providers. Outlines the opportunities and threats for institutions and for learners.

Kerchoff, A. C., and Bell, L. "Hidden Capital: Vocational Credentials and Attainment in the United States." ***Sociology of Education*** 71, no. 2 (April 1998): 152-174. (EJ 568 059)
Analysis of recent occupational data suggests that postsecondary educational credentials have varied effects on early labor force outcomes. Some credentials have greater value in the work force than associate's degrees, and their effects often differ for men and women.

Kohl, K. J., and LaPidus, J. B., eds. ***Postbaccalaureate Futures: New Markets, Resources, Credentials.*** Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press/ American Council on Education, 2000.
Investigates the burgeoning market for postbaccalaureate credentials; discusses certification for employability and the issues surrounding quality assurance and accreditation.

Lewis, L.; Farris, E.; Snow, K.; and Levin, D. ***Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1997-98***. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 1999.
The possibility of completing degree and certificate programs solely through distance education offers the potential for the most dramatic changes in access and opportunity. The number of distance education degree and certificate programs offered at higher education institutions has nearly doubled.

Marchese, T. J. "The Certificates Phenomenon." ***Change*** 31, no. 2 (March-April 1999): 4.
Developments in postbaccalaureate certificate programs are outrunning the capacity of existing quality assurance mechanisms. In addition, the efficiency and vocational directness of such programs may induce the expectation that all postsecondary education should be offered this way.

Naftali, L., and Naftali, J. E. ***You're Certifiable: The Alternative Career Guide to More than 700 Certificate Programs, Trade Schools, and Job Opportunities***. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
This comprehensive directory of certificate programs throughout the country provides data on how to get certified in a career, how long it will take, how much it costs, and what to expect on the job.

National Alliance of Business. "Skills Certificates Signal Competencies in a Demand-Driven Economy." ***WorkAmerica*** 17, no. 3. Washington, DC: NAB, March 2000.
Describes how businesses are collaborating with education providers to develop standards and curricula for employer-recognized certificates. Explains forces driving the demand for these credentials.

National Center for Education Statistics. ***Subbaccalaureate Persistence and Attainment***. Washington, DC: NCES, 1997. (ED 411 918)
Certificate seekers were more likely than associate degree seekers to attain a postsecondary credential (55% versus 43%, respectively); within 5 years of initial enrollment, 50% had earned a certificate, and 4% had earned an associate's degree.

Patterson, W. ***Summarizing Data on Certificate Programs***. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools, 1998. <classic.cgsnet.org/summary.pdf>
Contains the tabulated results of the certificate survey conducted initially through the Council of Graduate Schools deans' discussion list in 1998. The data depict the policies and procedures being used in the administration of graduate certificate programs at many institutions.

Patterson, W. ***Analyzing Policies and Procedures for Graduate Certificate Programs***. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools, 1999a. <classic.cgsnet.org/pdf/analysis.htm>
Discusses policy issues related to certificate programs and concludes with a set of model guidelines for the administration of certificate programs.

Patterson, W. "A Model of Shared Leadership for Graduate Certificate Programs." ***Continuing Higher Education Review*** 63 (Fall 1999b): 68-79. (EJ 590 724)
Shared governance of graduate certificate programs by graduate schools and continuing education schools would take advantage of different strengths: graduate schools offer quality assurance, and continuing education has a market orientation and understanding of work force development needs.

Patterson, W.; Cooper, S.; Spak, G. T.; Bernstein, B. L.; Lynch, C. B.; and Leyton-Brown, D. ***Certificate Programs: A Survey of Our Status and Review of Successful Programs in the U.S. and Canada.*** Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools, 1998. <www.cgsnet.org/pdf/certif.pdf>
Presents results of a survey of universities offering graduate certificate programs and analysis of programs at Indiana University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Arizona State University, the University of Colorado-Boulder, and the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies.

Skinner, R. A. "A Vision Expressed: Clayton State Answers Business' Call for New IT Programs." ***Educom Review*** 34, no. 2 (March-April 1999): 22-25. (EJ 586 314)
Describes the Information Technology Career Ladder program at Clayton College and State University (Georgia), the first competency-based, three-tiered (certificate, associate, bachelor's degrees) IT program at a U.S. university.

Sorensen, A. A., and Snider, J. C. "Linking the University Campus with the Global Village in the 21st Century." ***Journal of Continuing Higher Education*** 46, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 2-7. (EJ 573 001)
Electronically delivered degree and certificate programs must meet three criteria: quality assurance, faculty security, and financial support that facilitates institutional competitiveness. The demand for higher education will shift substantially toward the global marketplace.

University of Wisconsin. ***Report and Recommendations. Adult Access Working Group***. Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, December 1996. <www.uwm.edu/Dept/Acad_Aff/aawgrprp.htm>
Recommends expanding undergraduate and graduate certificate programs to meet the needs of the adult student market. Notes that such development should not diminish but strengthen ongoing and new degree programs.

White, C. J. "Understanding Executive Certificate Participants." ***Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*** 37, no. 3 (November 1997): 188-190. (EJ 555 046)
Responses from 27 of 51 participants in an executive certification program indicated that most were motivated by enhanced job and promotion opportunities, especially those aged 20-39. Over 50% received financial assistance or time off from employers for study.

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